

A SPLENDID PICTURE AND NO. 2 GIVEN WITH NO. 1.

THE
WOODWOSE
OF
CANNOCK
CHASE



ONE PENNY WEEKLY.

OFFICE, NEWSAGENTS' PUBLISHING COMPANY, FLEET ST., E.C.

THE
WOODWALK
OR
GARDEN
CHAIR

ILLUSTRATED WITH NUMEROUS ENGRAVINGS

BY A. VENNING, PUBLISHING COMPANY, LTD, LONDON.

THE
WOODWOSE
OF
CANNOCK
CHASE

ILLUSTRATED WITH NUMEROUS ENGRAVINGS

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1867.

THE
HARBOUR
READ
TO
THE
BOY SAILOR;
OR,
LIFE ON BOARD A MAN-OF-WAR.

ONE OF THE MOST THRILLING TALES OF THE DAY.

ILLUSTRATED WITH NUMEROUS ENGRAVINGS
Nos. 1 & 2 Presented Gratis
TO EVERY PURCHASER OF THIS NUMBER.

PUBLISHED WEEKLY. PRICE ONE PENNY.

London :
NEWSAGENTS, PUBLISHING COMPANY, 147 Fleet Street.

THE
WOODWOSE
OF
CANNOCK
CHASE



SIR RICHARD DALTON AND 'OLD STORM'

CHAPTER 1.

THE BITTER WINTER

THE incidents of this strange and exciting story occurred more than a hundred years ago.

* * * * *

SHUGBOROUGH HALL, the residence of Sir Richard Dalton, was an immense old building, that stood in a spacious, well-wooded park, not many miles from Cannock Chase.

As the mists cleared on that late November morning, Jack Frost watched his night's work slowly melt as the sun rose above the bare trees. The desolate fields were barren now but amongst the black hedgerows small animals and birds still went about Nature's business, their scurrying and fluttering made loud by the silence around them. If it could be helped, nobody went out of doors to-day. Hearths were kept warm and kettles kept hot on such a bitterly cold day.

So it was that someone — or something — could quite easily be abroad on a day like this and yet avoid prying eyes. Only God's small creatures bore witness to the large figure stalking at the edge of Cannock Chase. It walked with a stoop, its long hairy arms swinging by its side and its hands almost brushing the ground. Even so bent, it was still taller than a man. From time to time it paused and sniffed the air, as would a dog. But this was no loyal canine.

Ahead of the Being, tiny animals fled into their burrows and birds took flight to hedgerows on the far side of the field, sometimes with a cautionary squawk to their fellow feathered creatures. But the Being ploughed onward all the same, intent on some mysterious errand known only to itself.

On that same day, Sir Richard Dalton was feeling miserable. He had not long returned from London after unsuccessfully pursuing both love and fortune! The business had failed and the woman had departed without notice for Italy with a Count known to Dalton as a scoundrel and a cad.

"So be it!" said Dalton to himself, as he rung for his man to bring his riding boots. "I will let the wind blow this misery away, where it can lie in the blighted field thither."

Some minutes later, the stable boy had brought Storm into the yard, saddled in readiness for a winter's ride. Storm snorted a greeting as Sir Dalton lightly tripped down the steps of Shugborough Hall and made for his favourite steed. "There, there, Old Storm," said Dalton to the big black face, "let's both away and chase Jack Frost across to Brockton."

Dalton dismissed the stable boy with a wave of a gloved hand, and mounted Storm in a single bound. In moments, rider and horse were cantering down the long driveway and heading toward the lane bordering fields which led to a horse path favoured by both. They met no cart nor rustic on the road and the only sound was the whistling of the wind through the horse's mane and the hollow clack of its horseshoes on the frozen ground.

Dalton dismounted briefly to open the gate that led onto a large field — a short cut to the woods and then beyond that to the road that led to Brockton. The field had been turned in the autumn and now lay fallow, the frost slept in the furrows while the snow prettily decorated the ridges. The hard soil caused Storm to tread slowly and they stayed hard to the hedgerow in order to avoid ditches.

Feeling the wind bite, Dalton drew Storm to a halt and lifted his cloak to retrieve a hip flask from his waistcoat. He took a sifter of the whisky and took in the view before him.

"That is strange," he thought. In dead silence he looked all about him. The air was still and there was no movement at all save chimney smoke curling from distant cottages.

"A decidedly brutish day," he said to Storm.

But Storm's attention was not for once on his master's voice. Those senses that a horse possesses and which we do not, had reached out and taken hold of something. Could it even be described as a sound? A smell? A movement? What words should we use for something unfathomable? All the same, whatever it was that Storm sensed, his rigid attention made Dalton aware that something was awry.

"What is it Old Storm?" said Dalton, and he peered in the same direction as the black horse, towards the distant hedgerow on the opposite side of the field, half hidden by the dark silhouettes of trees bare of leaves.

— Of a sudden, both Storm and Dalton involuntarily jumped as one of those bare trees seemed to uproot itself, move out of the hedgerow and take a step into the field. It stopped momentarily, as if taking its bearings, and then surged forward with purpose towards the stupefied rider and horse. Dalton recovered first and digging his stirrups into old Storm, pulled the beast's head sharply round to the left and headed off back toward the gate.

But the dark creature now changed course and leapt and ran with fabulous ease across the furrows and toward its six-legged prey! All three met at the gate and immediately Storm reared up in fright as the Wild Beast flourished a branch, much as a rustic would a stout oak cudgel. Dalton was flung down onto the hard ground and left breathless as Storm galloped away, frozen turf flying through the air.

Now that the Creature was nearly upon him, Dalton could take in the truly horrific sight: here was a large hairy animal, on legs as thick as trees and with long arms to match. Its face was like that of an ape, but the red eyes were dark and malevolent, hooded under a low dark brow.

LOOK OUT FOR THE
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OR,
LIFE ON BOARD A MAN-OF-WAR.

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No. 2, with No. 1, and a LARGE ENGRAVING, GRATIS.

LOOK OUT FOR
SOMETHING NEW FOR THE BOYS!
A LARGE ENGRAVING
AND
VARIOUS PRIZES, GRATIS.
Full particulars in No. 6.

The figure reminded Dalton of a tapestry no longer on view at Shugborough Hall. A tapestry put away many years before due to age and moth-damage. This tapestry was a depiction of a Woodwose - A Wildman of the Woods - as it confronted some rustics and their herd of sheep.

"Yes," thought Dalton, "this thing before me is the Woodwose I remember from that old drapery!"

The Woodwose spun its head in the direction of voices. Before Dalton could follow its movements, it was gambolling along the hedgerow and in a few moments was out of sight.

The next thing Dalton saw was his old friend Lord Hunstone, accompanied by three other gentlemen on horses.

"What's this?" cried Lord Hunstone. "You had an adventure!"

"I did indeed, my old friend!" declared Dalton.

"Then let's have you up off the ground and perhaps you can explain to my friends and I exactly what you are doing laying around on a cold day like this?" laughed Lord Hunstone.

The two shook hands and while his men retrieved Storm who had gone not too far away, Dalton told Lord Hunstone about the strange creature which had attacked him. Once reunited with Storm - who was still shaken by the experience — the party of men then rode off together to the seat of the Hunstone family - Brockton Hall.

As Lord Hunstone led Dalton and the other members of the group up the long driveway toward the hall, he espied a figure on the steps waving a kerchief. He cantered up to discover what was amiss and his butler Lowe — the figure with the kerchief — soon explained all.

By the time Dalton arrived and dismounted, the whole household were in disarray. It was soon explained to Dalton that Lord Hunstone's two daughters had not returned from their morning ride, yet their horses had been found wandering free some miles away by the bailiff.

Lord Hunstone looked at Dalton with deep fear. "You don't think they could have become prey to your hairy Beast?" he asked, with wide eyes.

"There's only one way to discover the fact and reason of their disappearance," said Dalton levelly. "We must ride at once along the path your blessed daughters took this morning. Quick! There is no time to lose!"

So saying, he summoned Hunstone's stable boy to his side. "You, boy, pray what is your name?"

"Why, Dick it is, Sir," said the youth.

"Know you the favoured path for your Master's daughters to take their morning ride?" demanded Dalton.

"Aye, I do that Sir!" admitted the youth.

"Then get you a fast steed and come back here at once, that you may lead us in the correct direction!" ordered Dalton.

Dick did not hesitate for a moment, and by the time Lord Hunstone, Dalton and the three other gentlemen were mounted, Dick was galloping around the side of Brockton Hall on a young stallion.

"Follow me, Sirs!" cried Dick as he struck out down the driveway. And thus, the searching party departed and rode at speed after Dick, leaving Lady Hunstone to be comforted by the housekeeper.

As good as his word, Dick led the party across two meadows, the brittle, frozen grass shattering under the

hooves of the horses. They jumped the gate at the far end of the meadow and found themselves on a country road. After only a few minutes, a crossways checked their speed.

"Well, young Dick, which way do we head?" asked Dalton, "Time is short!"

"On my oath, Sir," said Dick, "Lady Hannah, she has a preference for the road that leads down to Tixall. However, I have overheard Lady Martha say she has a softness for the Milford Hall path Sir."

"Then we will separate in twain!" cried Dalton, "Hunstone, ride with your three friends toward Milford - perchance your daughters have already received aid and hospitality from Lord and Lady Levett. Myself and young Dick here will take the road to Tixall. Do not fear, Hunstone, your daughters will this night be back in Brockton Hall and this will be a tale for supper!"

"Onward then, Gentlemen!" cried Lord Hunstone, and he led his friends up the horse path, the beasts' nostrils flaring and filling the cold air with steam.

"Come, Dick!" shouted Dalton, and with that he dug his stirrups deep into Storm who neighed sharply before starting off down the path.

"I'll be right behind you Sir!" cried Dick as he thrust his steed down the same desolate track.

CHAPTER 2.

TWO LADIES IN LOVE

When they had started out that morning, Lady Hannah and Lady Martha had been in a contemplative frame of mind. Young John Deane from Blithfield had been in both of their thoughts for some weeks now. Deane had been organising the labourers who were repairing the east wing of Brockton Hall after a lightning storm had started a fire. He had proven able and practical and then had surprised both sisters at luncheon one day by reciting a poem he had authored, extolling the virtues of Cannock Chase.

Soon, each sister found herself inventing reasons to spend time in Deane's company — whether he were instructing the workmen on the repairs, or angling in Brockton Hall's trout lake. Each of them had on occasion managed to persuade the handsome young man to row them out onto the lake, and had read to him from books they supposed would arouse feelings of tenderness beneath his steely chest.

Thus it was that on this morning, Lady Martha had made up her mind that she would raise the subject of John Deane to her sister and steer the conversation toward a conclusion as to who should leave this delicate situation and who should remain.

But before Lady Martha could speak, her sister reined in her horse and held a pretty, gloved hand up.

"Do you see that man over there, Sister?" murmured Lady Hannah.

Lady Martha peered in the direction her sister was gazing.

NOTICE TO OUR READERS.

REMEMBER! — A most valuable present is in preparation, and will be presented to all our regular Subscribers with an early Number. Full particulars will be announced in Number 6.

"I believe I do," said Lady Martha, "but our dear Mr Deane would not be out on such a bleak day as this without his horse?" she enquired.

Lady Hannah shot a glance at Lady Martha. She too had been planning to engage her sister in a discussion designed to remove her from the romantic equation they were all figures in.

"No, it is not John. But it is a man all the same, and not one of our local rustics methinks," said Lady Hannah.

"You see how he moves slowly along the hedgerow, as if hiding from some quarry?" she continued.

"I do indeed, Sister," said Lady Martha, "and what action would you have us take, for we should surely avoid such a strange figure on a day such as this?"

"Are you not curious, Martha?" persisted Lady Hannah. "I want to ride closer and see what this Gentleman is about."

So saying, she commanded her horse to move forward, but was surprised that it did not respond.

"Ride on, Lavender," she told the horse, "allez!"

But the horse stood its ground, fearfully staring at the same dark figure by the hedgerow.

"I think we should return homeward Hannah, the horses are spooked by something and I too am beginning to feel a little uneasy," said Lady Martha.

Lady Hannah gave one more kick to her horse to try to persuade the beast to move. As she did so, her horse reared up a little and this motion made Lady Martha's horse start. Before the sisters knew what had happened, Martha was on the ground and her horse was galloping away toward the meadow, in the opposite direction to the dark figure in the hedgerow.

"Martha!" exclaimed Lady Hannah, and she immediately unmounted and slipped down to her sister's side to aid recovery. At once, Lady Hannah's horse bolted off after its stablemate and the women were now alone in the world, watched by the dark figure who had been aroused by the action of the animals.

As in a dream, Lady Hannah saw with horror that the black figure had emerged from the hedgerow and now gambolled and cavorted across the field toward the women. Lady Martha was blissfully fainted, and could not be roused by her sister. With a courage that surprised even her, Lady Hannah rose and stood in front of her sister's prone form. She closed her eyes and called out as loud as she could.

"Away with you, Monster!" she cried, and she heard the creature halt in front of her, a powerful odour and snorting grunts told her as much as she could bear without opening her eyes. She sensed the thing moving closer to her, a low growl rising in pitch and the beastly, animal stench becoming overpowering.

"Away... with... you..." Lady Hannah tried again, but with a voice as weak as a kitten's meow. She then made a valiant attempt to open her eyes, but the sight before her, along with the smell and the sound put her into a faint and she collapsed next to her sister onto the frozen soil.

CHAPTER 3.

THE CAVE

A clammy darkness was wrapped about Lady Hannah and a feeling of being outside of the world. She began to feel the pain of bruises and wondered what had happened to cause them. At once she remembered it all — her sister's fall, the beast upon her and the visage that had met her gaze when she had opened her eyes.

Now, she opened her eyes again and immediately wished that she had not.

She lay inside a dark cave. The mouth of the cave was bright and she could see snow on the trees and ground, while inside was a black mystery.

"Martha!" whispered Lady Hannah, "Martha, are you there dear Sister?"

A low grunting sound emerged from the darkness, and for a moment, Lady Hannah thought it to be Lady Martha. A wave of relief swept over her and her natural energy flowed back into her young body.

But then a large hairy shadow rose out of the darkness, silhouetted against the brightness of the cave mouth, and she realised that her horror had only just begun!

Lady Hannah pushed herself back on the floor of the cave, her dresses caught on stone and flint but yielded to her force with a sound of rending. The creature still moved slowly toward her, an amused look on its face as it watched the young woman squirm on the ground.

Lady Hannah's spine — tingling with fear — now came into contact with the moist wall of the cave and she knew then that there would be no escape. She looked frantically around her for a weapon of some kind but the light was too dim. Her hands scratched in the dirt for a stone, a rock, something she could hurl at the abomination...

And then her groping fingers touched something hard, and cold and yielding. She gripped the object — perhaps a short branch stripped of its bark — and held it out in front of her, ready to strike the thing when it was near enough.

The Woodwose seemed to understand the notion of a weapon. Dalton had seen it holding something of a cudgel when it approached him, but Lady Hannah was not privy to this intelligence; she only knew that holding the stick-like thing out had given the creature pause.

For a few terrifying moments, all there was in the world was the Woodwose and the young woman, her tattered clothes offering little protection against the cold air blowing in through the mouth of the cave. And then, the Woodwose struck —!

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THE
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LADY MARTHA AND LADY HANNAH

At once, Lady Hannah brought her improvised weapon down on the creature's head as it moved in close to her face. The Woodwose screamed — almost like a pig when stuck — and Lady Hannah scrambled around the side of it and threw herself forward and out of the cave's entrance into the bleak winter's brightness.

She looked down at her hands and with horror saw that the "stick" she had been holding was a bone — a human bone!

With disgust, Lady Hannah dropped the object, and hearing a noise behind her, plunged into the nearest tree-line, forcing herself through the biting branches and twigs, feeling them scratch at her arms and legs and tear more of her clothing away. In this way, she managed some progress through the thicket until the wood gave way to decaying bracken and then the vista of a frozen field and — Oh, Joy! — a distant cottage with a wisp of smoke at the chimney.

As she ran across the field, she was hardly aware of her bare feet thudding into the soil, frozen as hard as rock. Once, she tripped and fell into a ditch with a frozen puddle. The thin ice shattered under her weight and as she struggled back to her feet, she wiped the brown mud and dirt from her eyes which were already streaming with tears.

CHAPTER 4.

A TWO-PRONGED ATTACK

Dalton and young Dick had found no trace of Lord Hunstone's daughters. The thin, cold air had gone hard on their horses who were exhausted after half of an hour's galloping. The two riders stopped to let their horses recover their breath and to decide on the next action.

"Well, young Dick," said Dalton, "know you of any other haunts your mistress' daughters would tarry?"

"No, Sir," said Dick, "but methinks I know a place where this Monster you seen might a den make."

"Then tell me now boy! The day grows long!"

"Caves there are about here Sir, and each has a legend for us country folk. Should I take you to 'em Sir, and we see what can be seen?" said Dick, his eyes shining with a mingling of fear and excitement.

"At once, Dick!" cried Dalton, and he dug his stirrups into Storm's flank in readiness.

"Then follow me, Sir!" said Dick and with that he turned his own steed around was soon galloping down a woodland track, followed closely by Dalton.

* * * * *

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her bold Escape and
subsequent career as a Pirate !

No. 1 and a LARGE ENGRAVING GRATIS

ONE PENNY WEEKLY.

Lord Hunstone and his three friends had had no luck at Milford Hall, the Levettts being away in the Lakes and the servants not aware of any visitors that freezing morning. In desperation, Hunstone had led his men back to Brockton Hall to see if there were any word but all he found was that Lady Hunstone had taken to her bed and nobody had seen Dalton or young Dick since they departed an hour or more before.

But now, one old retainer stepped forward:

"The caves, Lord Hunstone. Try you the caves!" said the old man.

Lord Hunstone was about to dismiss the suggestion, but realised he had no other course of action, and so he turned to his friends, tired but still mounted and awaiting instruction.

"Westonby! Did you not tell of a hunt some two years past where the stag hid itself in a cave so not far from Brockton?" said Hunstone.

"Why yes," said Westonby, "you think it's possible that the creature might have taken the ladies prisoner in the cave?"

"I pray to the Devil himself that not be the case," declared Lord Hunstone, "but let us ride to the stag cave on the instant and see for ourselves! Lead the way Westonby!"

Westonby spun in his saddle, turned his horse and was off at a gallop with the others not far behind.

* * * * *

The first cave that Dick located was overgrown and abandoned by man and beast. Dalton stayed mounted, shotgun at the ready, whilst Dick poked about the entrance with a branch. Knowing country ways Dick was immediately convinced they would find naught.

"Nothing to see here, Sir," said Dick. "But there be another cave along the way."

So saying, he walked his horse further along the track and round a turn, while Dalton followed keeping a sharp look out all about him.

Dick stopped before a large tree which had grown around bushes that clung to rock and earth. A cleft in the rock showed a narrow entrance of sorts. Dick smashed the bushes with his stick and peered into the crack.

"Nothing here either Sir!" he called before jumping back onto his horse.

"Fear not, there be other caves. We will find them yet, Sir!" said Dick, trying valiantly to sound confident and manly.

"Then onward Young Dick, onward!" said Dalton.

The two riders cantered away along the track, leaving silence behind them.

* * * * *

Westonby, leading the way, was first to arrive at a small copse of trees often used by hunters as a marker. Lord Hunstone and his two other friends - Lord Hugh and James Bellamy - were not far behind.

"Well?" said Lord Hunstone.

"If it be true that your beloved daughters have been taken by this Woodwose, then methinks we should dismount here and converge with stealth on the stag's cave. Until we have knowledge of its contents, we should refrain from making a sound," said Westonby.

"Agreed," said Lord Hunstone, and they all dismounted, tied their horses and waited for Westonby to show the direction in which they should stalk. Westonby gestured for them to follow gingerly behind him and he purposely but with great caution moved

past the copse and headed toward a further tree line.

As they emerged from the trees, the four men had a clear view below them of the cave chosen so long ago by an exhausted stag to be its final place of refuge. They could see that in front of the cave entrance were objects scattered on the snow. Many tracks difficult to name, made curling lines all about. The cave itself was black to look at and gave no secrets away.

"I will go on down to the entrance," said Westonby. "Stay here and watch closely."

So saying, Westonby carefully took a step onto the snow-covered slope that led down to the cave.

Lord Hunstone, Lord Hugh and Bellamy raised their shotguns and stood ready to fire if anything should emerge suddenly from the black hole.

* * * * *

Dalton waited for Dick to tell him what he already held in suspicion.

"Naught but sleeping bats, Sir," said Dick as he reappeared out of the fifth cave they had examined.

"So be it," said Dalton, "we shall ride back toward Brockton and see if Lord Hunstone fared better."

They drove their horses up a bank and through a thin wood before finding the track they had lately rode on. At once, the riders kicked their horses and the caves and the hopes of finding Lady Martha and Lady Hannah in them were left behind in the silent snow.

* * * * *

James Bellamy stood at the rear watching the progress of Westonby as he made his way to the large cave entrance. Bellamy was alert to the fact that he had both a vulnerability and responsibility being stationed as he was at the group's back. Thus thinking, he had turned away from the others and watched back along the track they had taken. Two times he had started when he heard noises, but had faith that it was the sound of their horses, tied not so far away by the copse.

The third time he heard a noise, his doubts were sorely tested and he made a half turn back to his neighbour.

"I say Hugh," whispered Bellamy, "did you hear something?"

Lord Hugh turned in Bellamy's direction and peered back toward the copse.

"Nay," said Lord Hugh, "it'll be the horses methinks."

But then both men heard a low growl that no equine could produce, lest it were a horse born in hell!

Bellamy and Lord Hugh looked at each other and both took a step forward.

"Where is it?" breathed Bellamy sharply.

They both waited for further sound and they were not kept long waiting!

The sound of a neighing horse can pierce the silent cloth of any night, but on such a silent winter's day as this that sound is like the trumpet of the devil! But the sound that all the men now shuddered to hear was far worse! It was the sound of many horses neighing and snorting, greatly disturbed by something unseen.

"It's attacking the horses!" cried Bellamy and he and Lord Hugh both moved to return to the copse.

Lord Hunstone was at that moment torn! Should he follow Lord Hugh and Bellamy back to the horses or stay to support and watch over Westonby who was now on the threshold of the cave? He turned back to look at Westonby who had heard the commotion and was looking up expectantly at Lord Hunstone.

Without a word crossing his lips, Lord Hunstone gestured with his shotgun for Westonby to continue into the stag's cave and Westonby knew that he meant to stand firm and watch the venture.

It took but a minute for Bellamy and Lord Hugh to get back to the horses and they both caught sight of a dark figure moving at speed away from the frightened beasts.

"It is he," cried Bellamy, "it's the Woodwose!"

Lord Hunstone heard the cry, but was determined to offer protection to his old friend Westonby.

Lord Hunstone cursed under his breath. "I dare not leave Westonby until we know the cave here be innocent."

At the copse, Lord Hugh and Bellamy were trying to calm the horses and mount them in order to give chase. They soon achieved this and were away on the trail despite their steeds' reluctance.

CHAPTER 5.

A TRAGIC END

Sir Richard Dalton and young Dick were picking their way along the edge of a large field. Where the snow had part thawed the earth showed through and from a distance, these patterns could be mistaken for tracks. Thrice Dalton believed he had found boot imprints, but Dick had disappointed him by soon explaining they were the confused marks of deer.

Cocked and alert as they were, they both jumped in their saddles when they heard a gunshot.

The shot echoed in that winter landscape and both men looked about them trying to divine the origin.

* * * * *

At the stag's cave, the shot transformed the mind of Lord Hunstone.

"Westonby!" shouted Lord Hunstone, "we must leave now! Bellamy must have something, and nothing stirs in your cave!"

"No!" hissed Westonby, "there is something here, I sense it."

"We must see what Bellamy is about, Westonby," said Lord Hunstone.

"I require you to stay here, Hunstone," said Westonby.

Lord Hunstone made his decision. He raised his loaded shotgun and began to edge down the slope toward the cave and Westonby.

"Wait no more Westonby," said Lord Hunstone, "let us enter the darkness together."

* * * * *

Bellamy and Lord Hugh were riding as fast as their steeds could manage, but the going was slow as thick bush and low branches tripped and grabbed at them. Bellamy had indeed caught sight of a distant, dark, shambling figure and had let go a shot praying for luck. But none was to be had, and so they pushed their horses onward until they almost tumbled out of the woods onto a large field, in size perhaps five hectares or more.

The two men looked sharply about them.

"There!" cried Lord Hugh.

In the middle of the field a shabby dark figure was tumbling as fast it could go toward the far hedgerow.

"We have it in the open!" cried Bellamy, and he kicked his horse into a gallop and raised his shotgun.

About halfway down that field, Dalton and Dick were also watching the same figure in the centre of the bright, pock-marked snow.

"The Woodwose!" said Dalton, in awe.

"What now, Sir?" asked Dick excitedly.

"Why, we chase it down like a fox, of course!" said Dalton and together he and Dick thundered out toward the figure.

Bellamy was startled at first to see two more riders closing fast on his quarry, but when he recognised Lord Hunstone's friend, his heart bounded, for he now knew they should at last kill this thing that had taken two daughters of noble birth as if they were but common rabbits.

Behind Bellamy, Lord Hugh also saw Dalton and the stable boy converging on their target, and he drew his horse up, the better to take a shot with his gun. He carefully aimed at the figure which had tumbled down again, through fear or exhaustion it was hard to say.

Lord Hugh pulled the trigger as the figure got to its feet and as the shot found its mark the figure spun violently around, its hair dancing with the motion.

Dalton had drawn up Storm and now he too let fly with his shotgun. The brown figure was reaching out an arm when the shot hit with a force that made it take a step backwards before falling forward into the soiled snow.

Bellamy's horse reared up at the sound of Lord Hugh's report so close by, and he was forced to stop and gain control. Dalton held Storm steady and loaded another cartridge to his shotgun whilst watching what the wounded creature would do next, but Dick — with the fearlessness of youth — plunged his horse onward.

As Dick approached the shabby figure he saw that it was still moving, trying to crawl away from those that would kill it. Dick only reined in his steed when he was almost on top of the thing. He saw that it left a crimson trail in the snow behind it. Its body was a mess of bloodied fur, twigs and mud gathered from its falling and tumbling.

"Die, you monster!" whispered Dick under his breath. He pulled out his small penny knife that he had only ever used for skinning rabbits.

The figure stopped its crawling and turned its face up to look at Dick. Half hidden by mussed up hair, its eyes still shone from its brown face and the mouth opened exposing bloody teeth.

"Dick!" moaned the figure in voice so weak that Dick thought his imagination had overcome him.

"Oh - Dick!" it said again and then the face fell forward into the snow and a final shudder passed through its body.

With mounting terror and as if in a dream, Dick dismounted and took trembling steps toward the broken figure, his boots crunching in the thawing snow, and his penny knife held out before him.

Among the dirt and twigs and mossy hair, Dick fancied he saw something cream coloured. He

moved closer now and knelt before the prone form. He gingerly reached out to touch the half-revealed whiteness and felt the material of a petticoat! As if transformed by this touch, Dick at once saw that the body was brown only because of hardened mud, the twigs and soil encrusted into it giving an appearance of fur from a distance. The long hair flowing from the thing's head was all too real, but once more, soil and foliage had bequeathed a wildness that hid the truth!

Dick lifted the long hair and looked into the face of one he had known for many a long year, his very marrow frozen at the spectacle.

"Lady Hannah!" breathed Dick.

He pushed himself away from the corpse and tried to stagger to his feet. He heard the sound of hooves behind him and turning saw Dalton, Bellamy and Lord Hugh all arrive at the same time. Now it was their turn to stare with disbelief at the body that lay before them.

"'Tis Lady Hannah," said Dick, almost choking on the words.

Dalton's eyes were almost out of his head. He jumped down from his horse and in two strides was standing over the smashed and bloodied form. He prodded at the lifeless body with his shotgun before turning it over with his boot so that it lay on its back and immediately recognised the once beautiful features of Lady Hannah - her staring eyes seeing nothing, her gaping mouth now wordless!

"I fancy I missed my shot," said Lord Hugh and everyone turned to look at him.

"Yes," Lord Hugh continued, "fancy I missed the mark there, Bellamy. This gentleman here is entirely responsible for this atrocity!"

Dalton now stood and stared with fury at Lord Hugh.

"What did you say?" Dalton asked coldly.

Bellamy interrupted the exchange.

"Gentlemen!" said he, "Methinks we are all in this as one. It is of signal importance that we act with honour and greet whatever fate befalls us. The Almighty knows that this poor girl has met her dreadful end, and that we are all of us guilty to a degree of —".

We will never know what Bellamy's next word was to be, for Dalton had turned his shotgun toward the man and let it off with an echoing report that made all the horses jump. The force took Bellamy from his saddle, and he landed heavily on the frozen ground, his chest a sight more usually observed in the shop of a butcher.

Lord Hugh was aghast.

"Bellamy!" Lord Hugh cried, and he jumped down from his horse and went to his friend who was struggling still on the soil.

Dick watched Lord Hugh kneel at his friend's side and gently lift his head. Turning back, Dick saw Dalton reach into his waistcoat and pull out a cartridge then he breeched open his shotgun and pushed the cartridge home. Before he knew what he was doing Dick threw himself at Dalton and stabbed at his chest with his penny knife.

The weight and strength of the youth caused Dalton to fall back onto the snow and Dick fell on top of him. After only a short struggle, a loud report sent Dick rolling over and over until he stopped in a furrow. Dalton got to his feet, smoke still curling from his

shotgun.

Lord Hugh looked with horror from the still form of the stable boy and then back to the pale face of his friend Bellamy who was breathing his last, the cold air making short sprites of steam above his mouth.

Dalton inspected the small wound Dick had inflicted and saw it was of no consequence.

"Well, Sir," said Dalton levelly at Lord Hugh, "what is it to be. You and I both know our culpability on this tragedy — will you own it Sir, that we may yet walk free? Or thinks you that you could concoct a credible tale to tell a gullible Magistrate?"

Lord Hugh gently laid the head of his dead friend on the frozen ground and stood up. The two men now faced each other, corpses and blood scattered around them.

"You have a method for evading the hangman's noose, Sir?" said Lord Hugh. "Then let me hear it."

Dalton looked over at the dead stable boy.

"You shall hear it while we work, for time is against us and Lord Hunstone and his friend Westonby will be joining this macabre party at any moment," said Dalton.

CHAPTER 6.

A CONCOCTION OF LIES

Lord Hunstone and Westonby were over the threshold of the cave now, and both were peering into the darkness trying to make out what might be in there with them. The clammy dankness smelt of mildew and the waste of animals.

"Oh, but for a lamp that we might see more clearly," sighed Lord Hunstone.

Westonby stumbled on something at his feet and reached down with his gloved hand. He pulled at something that gave but a little, weighted by a connexion he could not fathom.

"Something here," said Westonby, "but I know not what."

Westonby pulled hard on the object and heard the sound of material being rent. Still the object would not free itself.

"Here, Hunstone, give me a hand!" said Westonby.

Lord Hunstone could see the grey silhouette of his friend and stepped toward him. As he did so, he too stumbled over a form on the ground and fell heavily onto the floor of the cave. The overpowering stench of raw meat struck Lord Hunstone's nostrils and he pulled himself up at once, snorting with disgust.

"What haunts this dismal place?" asked Lord Hunstone.

At once the object in Westonby's grasp gave way and he staggered back still holding it. Lifting it to his face and turning back to the cave entrance to allow the grey daylight to fall on the object, he almost laughed with relief.

"Why, 'tis but an old boot!" said Westonby.

Lord Hunstone stepped carefully over to Westonby and took the boot from him.

"Aye - but a lady's boot at that!" said Lord Hunstone, and he then felt further down and touched stocking, cold flesh and finally splintered bone.

With a cry that reverberated around the rock

walls, Lord Hunstone dropped the human leg and staggered out of the cave entrance into the freezing cold air.

"It cannot be!" shouted Lord Hunstone holding his arms out beseeching the snow-covered trees. "Why, O Lord? Why?"

Lord Hunstone fell to his knees at the cave entrance and his staring eyes began to pick out the tracks in the snow, as well as portions of dress material he knew so well and other, indescribable morsels of meat and bone.

Westonby stepped out of the cave and helped his friend to his feet.

"Hunstone, we must away to Bellamy and Hugh - for now there is only vengeance to wrought. Vengeance on the foul beast that produced this carnage."

So saying, the two men looked back up the slope and began to hurry up it, their shotguns ready in their arms, murder in their minds.

* * * * *

In the centre of the large field, Dalton and Lord Hugh stood back and studied their handiwork.

On the frozen snow, the corpses and blood were all still present, but the bodies had been shifted and weapons repositioned.

Lord Hugh kept glancing around to see if they were observed, while Dalton was deep in thought as he considered carefully the explanation they would shortly be obliged to give to a grief-stricken father.

"Hugh," said Dalton, "listen closely. We discovered them just like this: We will tell that Bellamy had earlier given the boy his shotgun and then mistakenly the boy had shot Lady Hannah, believing her to be the Woodwose. Bellamy, you and I arrived on horseback at the sound of the shot and the boy was caught red-handed! The boy then shot Bellamy. Having spent his cartridge, the boy came at me with his penny knife and I was forced to shoot him dead. We were too late to save Bellamy or the Lady Hannah. Do you have it fixed in your mind?"

"I do," said Lord Hugh slowly, "but methinks there may be awkward questions. There are two shots in the woman — "

"Easily explained by the boy discovering his mistake and dispatching her with the intention of hiding the body afore he was discovered," said Dalton.

"And what if Hunstone and Westonby heard the other gun shots? There are only three accounted for here," said Lord Hugh.

"We do not know about the other shots," said Dalton, "we are as blind as anyone concerning the events that took place afore we arrived on the scene. We do not have to offer explanation for things we can easily claim we did not see nor hear."

"Well," said Lord Hugh, "we will shortly have a chance to see if our story holds water, for here come Hunstone and Westonby at the gallop!"

Across the field Lord Hunstone and Westonby were indeed approaching at speed. They slowed as they approached the tableau before them. Lord Hunstone was incredulous as he looked from corpse to corpse. His voice quaked as he spoke:

"What in God's name has happened on this ghastly field?"

Dalton let a moment pass and waited for Lord Hunstone to look at him with questioning eyes before

he began his explanation.

"Hunstone, I am sorely afraid to tell that your daughter, the Lady Hannah, is lost, shot in cold blood — certainly in error, but in cold blood all the same — by this scoundrel stable boy. Lord Hugh, Bellamy and I rode as fast as we could when we heard the report but resisting capture, the boy shot Bellamy dead where he still lies." Dalton looked over at Bellamy's body and Lord Hunstone followed his gaze.

Lord Hugh then spoke: "The caitiff then came at us with his knife," and Dalton obliged Lord Hunstone by lifting his cloak to show a small blood stain, "and we had no choice but to finish him."

Lord Hugh and Dalton caught each other's glance, and the exchange was not lost on Westonby who wondered what it could mean.

"But - why would he do such a thing?" cried Lord Hunstone.

"An accident for sure," said Dalton, "the distance and — forgive me for saying so — the dishevelled appearance of Lady Hannah - led the boy to believe he had seen our Woodwose, and alas, he did not hesitate."

Lord Hunstone's body sagged in the saddle. "My God, what a black day this is! One daughter eaten by a monster, the other slain by my own stable boy who has also murdered Bellamy. I fear Lady Hunstone will not live long on hearing this awful news."

Dalton looked with interest at Lord Hunstone and Westonby. "Eaten, you say? Eaten?"

It was Westonby who answered the enquiry. "We found remains at the stag's cave — "

No further explanation was forthcoming but Dalton's mind began to turn over this new intelligence, dissecting it for serendipitous possibilities.

"Then the Woodwose is still abroad," said Dalton, with action in his voice. "We have red work ahead of us gentlemen. I propose Lord Hunstone stay here with his beloved daughter. Lord Hugh, go you to Brockton Hall and fetch a cart with men to help tidy up this tragic place. Westonby, you and I will return to your stag's cave and see if we cannot track this beast."

Lord Hugh was only too pleased to be away from both the scene and from Dalton, and he immediately rode off in the direction of Brockton.

Lord Hunstone dismounted and knelt at Lady Hannah's side. He briefly touched her still hand, then removed his cloak and placed it over Lady Hannah's face, reposing in cold death.

After a respectful moment, Westonby turned his horse and charged away back toward the cave, Dalton on old Storm close behind him with many ideas crowding his mind.

CHAPTER 7.

PREPARATIONS AT BROCKTON HALL

The servants and workers at Brockton Hall were milling around the stable yard and at the front of the building, urgently asking each other what could have happened to Lady Martha and Lady Hannah. John Deane had been sent for from Blithfield hours earlier and once arrived he had been informed of all that had transpired.

"It is beyond belief," said Deane, "the women were skilled riders and I for one do not hold credible stories of Woodwose or Wildmen - why almost certainly these creatures are merely rustics or peasants mistook in unusual circumstance. All the same, we must undertake a search, and in the proper fashion — not this slipshod enterprise Sir Richard Dalton seems to have inspired."

"What should we do, Mr Deane?" asked one of the farm labourers. Deane was well known to them as a practical, intelligent young man brimming with ideas and imagination.

John Deane looked around him and then out down the driveway and the open countryside. He turned to the kennel master standing nearby.

"Why, we will use the hounds, Dorkins," said Deane. "We'll scent them with clothes from our missing Ladies and the dogs will lead us to them, what ere has betook them."

"I will fetch some garments worn only yesterday," said one of the housemaids.

"Bravo, Mary," said Deane to the girl and she sped up the steps into Brockton Hall.

"You men," said Deane to the assembled workers and servants, "those of you who know the saddle, get you a steed and prepare for the ride of your life."

With excited shouts, some of the men ran to the stable and soon there came the sound of neighing and the clip clop of horseshoes on cobble stones.

Deane now turned to the Hunstone's longest serving butler, Lowe.

"Lowe," said Deane, "fetch the large scale map of Cannock Chase from the cabinet in your Lord's study. We will carefully plan this expedition and execute it in a professional way that will guarantee success."

"Immediately, Sir," said Lowe and he too hurried up the steps and into the hallway.

John Deane mounted his own horse now and listened and watched around him, satisfied that the preparations were sound and that nothing had been overlooked. He narrowed his eyes and allowed himself a half-smile. "This day is not ended until I say so," he said to himself.

* * * * *

Westonby showed Dalton where to tie his horse when they reached the copse near the stag's cave.

"It is this way, less than a minute's stroll," said Westonby.

"Stay here and guard us well," said Dalton to Storm. The horse neighed softly at its master.

The two men started to walk slowly toward their target, looking all about them and listening hard. The cold air was still and except for the sound of distant carrion crows, nothing stirred to break the silence.

"So," said Dalton, half to himself, "yet another cave that we missed on our search."

"This place is full of 'em," said Westonby. "Many's the time out on a hunt when a fox or deer has sought refuge and then been cornered by the hounds. When they comprehend the jig is up, the large stags come out fighting. It's quite a sight."

"Maybe, but methinks that the creature we saw this morning would make mincemeat of any stag, Westonby," said Dalton.

Westonby nodded, remembering the fleeting glimpse he had seen of the large, hairy being hours earlier. He was also musing on the look exchanged between Lord Hugh and Dalton and decided to inquire further into the circumstances that had led to such a terrible conclusion.

"What do you think came over the boy?" asked Westonby. "How could anyone mistake a woman for such an unholy creature as came at you this morn?"

"It is common among the lower classes that a kind of madness overtakes them at times when a man needs to hold his wits," said Dalton, shrugging his shoulders. "They fly into a panic and know not what they are doing."

Westonby said nothing, but raised a hand to Dalton.

"This is it, we should lower our voices now," said Westonby quietly. "Follow me and I will show you the dreadful place."

The two men, shotguns drawn, descended the slope toward the mouth of the cave. The snow was beginning to melt as the noon sun valiantly fought to break through the grey cloud, and many of the objects about the entrance — previously hidden from view — now emerged from their white shroud.

Dalton saw part of an arm with a delicate hand frozen into a clenched fist. Shreds of dress material and women's cloaks were scattered around and much of the snow was stained crimson.

"The melting snow has revealed more than we could note on our first expedition here," said Westonby, shaking his head at the horrors strewn about.

"And what of the cave," asked Dalton, "you and Hunstone entered it?"

"We did, but found only gore," said Westonby, "I shudder to think of the terror those poor young women endured."

Dalton paused long enough to produce an impression of respect, and then took a step toward the cave.

"As familiar as you are with it Westonby, I believe the best course is for you to take the same steps you took earlier," said Dalton thoughtfully. "I will be behind you and ready with my shotgun should anything untoward happen."

"Agreed," said Westonby, and he cautiously stepped over the threshold of the entrance and into the shadows.

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CHAPTER 8.

SOME DEPARTURES

At Brockton Hall, the preparations were complete. Six men — including the butler Lowe — had found horses and all were now mounted and ready, the animals stamping their shoes on the cobbles with impatience.

John Deane had visited the kennels with Dorkins and from the pack of hunting hounds they had selected two of the sharpest. These dogs had had long leashes fitted to their collars and been introduced to garments worn less than a day before by Lady Martha and Lady Hannah.

Once he was sure the hounds had the scent, Deane had given the signal and the party set off down the long driveway, the hounds leading the way in their eagerness to be on the search. Those left behind to worry and fret could only wave kerchiefs and call "Godspeed, John Deane!"

The hunting party was soon out of sight, and Mary the chambermaid turned to the housekeeper.

"What will we do now, Mrs. Butterworth?" asked Mary, her fear getting the better of her.

Mrs. Butterworth had worked for the Hunstone's for most of her life but still she hid her own apprehensions from the young girl. "There, there, Mary," she patted the girl's arm, "we will trust in God and He will shake off our doubts and deliver Lady Hannah and Lady Martha back to us before dusk."

So saying, Mrs. Butterworth clapped her hands to get everyone's attention.

"When Mr. Deane returns with Lord Hunstone and our blessed Ladies there will be a supper tonight as we have not seen at Brockton for some years. Let us prepare for the homecoming as best we can — there are fires to be laid in the guest rooms, and extra clothing to be ironed and arranged. Cook — go to your pantry and prepare soups, for there will doubtless be cold limbs to warm when they all get back here."

Mrs. Butterworth's stirring speech did indeed go some way to blowing away the torpor and fear that had descended on them all, and soon the household was bustling with activity.

* * * * *

From the moment they had arrived at the crossways, the two hounds began straining at their leashes to head off on one track. John Deane and his riders stared in the same direction as if to discern the future, as a gipsy woman might peer into a chrystral ball.

"They have the scent, men!" Deane cried. "Let them lead us on to our Ladies!"

As one mind, Deane and the other six riders allowed the dogs their head, their leashes held strong by Dorkins the kennel-master on his own steed, and all raced along the path which led to the fields.

* * * * *

Shortly later, in the main hallway of Brockton Hall, Mrs. Butterworth was helping Mary carry baskets of linen to the guest rooms when a commotion outside gave her pause. She placed the heavy wickerwork on the floor and opened the main doors.

Outside was an exhausted man on an even more bone-weary horse.

Mrs. Butterworth peered closely at the figure, before running down the steps to him.

"Why, Lord Hugh, whatever has happened? Did

THE
WOODWOSE
OF
CANNOCK
CHASE



THE CAVE OF THE WOODWOSE

you see Mr. Deane? Have you news of our Ladies?"

Lord Hugh turned and looked at Mrs. Butterworth and his ghastly expression stopped her questions.

"We require a cart, Mrs. Butterworth," said Lord Hugh patiently, as to a child, "a cart as well as horses enough to pull it some miles from here and back again. Fetch the men immediately."

"But there are none here!" Mrs. Butterworth hardly knew where to begin. "All the horses and men are gone with John Deane to find Lady Martha and Lady Hannah. They took hounds!"

"Hounds? What are you saying woman?" said Lord Hugh.

"Aye," explained Mrs. Butterworth, "hounds! We gave 'em our Ladies' fresh scent and put 'em on leashes and they be off to show Mr Deane and the party their whereabouts."

"Is no-one here?" asked Lord Hugh looking up at the huge facade of Brockton Hall.

"None but the maids and the frail," said Mrs. Butterworth, "Lady Hunstone is being tended in her chamber," she added.

Lord Hugh was for some moments at a loss as to what the best course of action would be. The knowledge of what he and Dalton had done loomed over him like a black axe suspended on a woollen thread.

"Bring me brandy and a hot scone," instructed Lord Hugh, "and then I will away and assist as best I can." He looked over Mrs. Butterworth's shoulder and saw Mary the chamber maid standing at the door in consternation. "Fear not ladies! A conclusion will soon be at hand!"

As Mrs. Butterworth hurried indoors to fetch the tea, Lord Hugh wiped his brow with his kerchief. It had been the most trying day of his life and still he struggled to find the best path out of it.

CHAPTER 9.

CONFRONTATION AT THE CAVE

Westonby had only taken three steps into the cave when he heard Dalton cock his shotgun behind him. In the gloom he could only make out Dalton's silhouette, so he broke the stony silence with a question. "You see something?" he hissed at Dalton. "I do, Sir," said Dalton, "I see a way out of this blasted maze!"

So saying, Dalton raised the shotgun and pulled the trigger, but the damp air had done for the flint and powder and there was naught but a dull note. Seizing his chance, Westonby lunged at Dalton and they both tumbled out of the cave and into the grey light of day. Blinded temporarily, Dalton fumbled for his shotgun which had fallen from his grasp.

But Westonby had grabbed his own gun and was on his feet, standing above Dalton. "I urge you to cease all movement, Sir, and in great speed gift me with an explanation that might prevent me from pulling my own trigger on you this very instant!"

From a sitting position, Dalton raised his hands, while his breeches grew damp in the wet snow.

"You shall have your explanation," Dalton said, "but I warn you Westonby, it will not be a pretty tale."

"I doubt it not," said Westonby.

"Lord Hunstone is my neighbour and my friend,"

began Dalton, "and he and I have had a mutual understanding for years now that if one or the other of us is in a bind then we can rely on the other to free us."

"Make sense, Sir," said Westonby impatiently, "where does this tale lead?"

"John Deane has been blackmailing our friend Hunstone for some months," said Dalton, "and Hunstone believes you are involved in the subterfuge."

Westonby raised his eyebrows in surprise and waited for more, but Dalton said nothing, preferring to think and let the idea percolate in Westonby's mind.

Westonby broke first. "What is the nature of this alleged blackmail?"

"A gentleman such as myself finds it difficult to break a confidence but," here Dalton glanced at the barrel of Westonby's shotgun, "I see we are at an impasse, and I have no choice but to throw myself on your mercy and honour, if indeed you are in possession of such qualities."

Seeing now that he had Westonby's close attention, Dalton gestured weakly that he might be allowed to get to his feet. Westonby nodded assent but did not remove the shotgun from its target. Dalton made a great show of shaking snow from his clothes and brushing down his damp trousers.

"You must know that Deane had formed an attachment with Hunstone's daughters," asked Dalton.

Westonby had heard rumours and gave a short curt nod.

"I am afraid that the ruffian took advantage of affections which did not rightfully belong to a gentleman of honour," said Dalton watching Westonby's reaction to his every word.

"What has this to do with your attempt to destroy me?" asked Westonby pointedly.

"Why, everything!" said Dalton with seriousness. "Hunstone is beside himself! He suspects everyone of aiding and abetting Deane to take his prize — or prizes in this case. When Hunstone and I last spoke some weeks ago he confided that you, Westonby, were in cahoots with Deane and if you and I were to cross paths I should take great care."

Dalton allowed this intelligence to sink in and then he continued:

"Hunstone and I have a code known only to ourselves, and this morning, on that terrible field, he gave me the subtle signal we had arranged, and so I became convinced that all he had told me before was but the truth and that it was you Westonby, who did murder in cold blood Lady Martha here in this hellish cave, motivated by a jealousy that your affections were not returned and that Deane should not have all the spoils for himself!"

"Are you insane?" asked Westonby.

"On my honour Sir, when I saw for myself the remains scattered about here and the casual air you showed as you walked about them, I began to believe all my friend Hunstone had told me."

Westonby was stupefied. While it was true that he and Lord Hunstone had in the past had their quarrels, it seemed inconceivable that Hunstone had never mentioned a word about suspicion and jealousy. But the morning's events had exhausted his mind and the cold air had dimmed his wits and his energy. He lowered the barrel of the shotgun the measure of two thumbs.

"If all you say is true then I should this instant take your life and knit a web of lies to tell about it later,"

said Westonby with a severe expression.

Dalton waited in anticipation.

"But you will observe that I do not pull this trigger," said Westonby, "and this should be all the proof you require that I am innocent of Hunstone's suspicions and that I am ready to play my part in ridding the world of this vile Woodwose."

Westonby lowered the shotgun even more and Dalton tensed his muscles ready to launch an attack, but a sudden change of expression on Westonby's face gave him pause.

A look of pain and surprise overcame Westonby and as if possessed by demons he rose from the snowy earth into the air. Dalton's mouth fell open as he followed the impossible levitation and he found himself saying: "Westonby?"

And then all became starkly clear. Behind Westonby and until now unobserved by the two men, involved as they were in their black conference, the Woodwose had crept up from the darkness of the cave, reached out its long hairy arm and taken hold of the back of Westonby's neck. It was then that it had raised him up off the ground with astonishing ease and begun to crush the neck-bone of the unfortunate man.

As life left Westonby he found only that he was staring with disbelief at Dalton and as his muscles tensed he pulled the trigger on the shotgun that was pointed down at the ground.

The report immediately spurred Dalton into motion and he turned and ran back up the slope as might quicksilver, slipping in the thawing snow and scrabbling with his hands for a hold. Behind him, the Woodwose dropped Westonby as a child does a rag-doll and let forth a low growl.

When Dalton got to the copse he saw that the two horses were in a panic. Westonby's horse had somehow got his lead wrapped around his leg and old Storm was whinnying violently. In vain Dalton tried to calm Storm and in an instant the horse broke loose and galloped away into the bushes. The other horse was still bound, its eyeballs on stalks and Dalton looked back the way he had come to see the Woodwose's head appear from the slope, its fierce eyes glowing red.

Dalton ran as fast as he could, hearing the horrible screaming of the horse being torn apart by a malevolent force greater than anything he had encountered.

"How long," thought Dalton as he pushed through more thicket, "how long before it finishes with the horse and comes after me?"

CHAPTER 10.

A GATHERING AT THE FIELD

Lord Hunstone had felt the weight of his advanced years in the last few hours. His face was haggard now and he stood forlornly watching over Lady Hannah's body, the cold wind chilling his marrow, having sacrificed his own warm cloak to shroud his child.

Carrion crows had gathered in nearby trees, drawn by the scent of death, and now watching from branches without leaves. Lord Hunstone cursed them. "Be gone, foul birds!" He scooped some snow from the ground and cast it at the crows but they were too distant to be frightened.

As Lord Hunstone looked around for something

heavier, he noticed a figure making its way down the edge of the field. The figure walked steadily and had a fowling piece slung on his back. Lord Hunstone watched the man for some moments before recognising him as a local farmer of the parish.

"Jessop!" called out Lord Hunstone in relieved tones, for he was glad of seeing a friendly face amid the horror of the events of the morning.

Jessop made his unhurried way over to Lord Hunstone, stepping through the snow covered furrows, until he stopped dead when he saw the three bodies lying about.

"—!" swore Jessop, and then recovered himself to greet his neighbour. "Lord Hunstone, what dreadful mischief 'as 'appened 'ere?"

"My beloved Hannah lies murdered at my feet," said Lord Hunstone, "shot by this youth who also killed my friend Bellamy over there before being shot himself by Sir Richard Dalton. I wait for men and carts from Brockton Hall. Will you bide with me Jessop, and keep a bereaved father company in his desperate hour of need?"

"At your service, Lord Hunstone," said Jessop, touching his cap, "our hearts always did sing when's watchin' Lady Hannah and 'er sister ride o'er the meadow down by the well. Always waved a cheery greeting they did."

Hunstone looked at the old man before speaking: "I am afraid that Lady Martha has also met her Maker this morning, Jessop."

The old man's eyes grew large and filled with tears.

"What disaster befell that wonderful child, Lord Hunstone?" Jessop's voice was quiet.

"She was —," Lord Hunstone hesitated, "that's to say — we believe she was attacked by a Woodwose near caves at Brockton."

"— Woodwose?" cursed Jessop and he spat on the frozen ground. "Devil-bears I's call 'em. The tunnels and caves 'ereabouts are full of 'em, but they keep to their selves most o' the time. Perchance this unnatural cold month 'as brought 'em out to forage?"

Lord Hunstone and Jessop looked along the margins of the field, at the stark tree line and woods beyond — a world in which all gaiety and colour had been drained leaving only silhouettes and shadows. A carrion crow cawed. Jessop picked up a clog of frozen sod and with a perfect aim hurled the missile at the crows where it broke on their branches and caused them to flutter into the sky.

"If you daren't mind, Lord Hunstone," said Jessop, "I'll's 'elps meself to this gentlemen's fallen shotgun in the event of a return of that 'wose." So saying, Jessop walked over to the mortal remains of Bellamy, lifted the discarded weapon and carefully inspected it while dusting off the snow.

"I 'as me own fowling piece 'ere on me back," continued Jessop, "but an 'ungry 'wose can be a devillish fiend, I've 'eard folk tell. Better we 'ave more powder 'as we need than too little." He pulled a rag from his coat and began wiping the barrel and fittings before breeching the shotgun and fixing a cartridge.

"Jessop," began Lord Hunstone, "I had always placed stories of the Woodwose in the same pocket as that of Stag Men and Goblins. Have your own eyes seen these creatures hereabouts?"

"I've smelt 'em, that I can promise you. And once that sweet stench has entered your nostrils, so it

remains with you until your last day on this earth," answered Jessop.

Lord Hunstone nodded. "My friends and I fancied we saw one this morning before the tragedy unfolded. It was on the cusp of ending Dalton's life, but our shotguns scared it away."

Jessop's eyes gleamed. "Then this isn't no ordinary 'wose, Lord Hunstone. Attacking two innocents in one day? This be devil's business and no's mistake."

The two men suddenly looked across the field as they both heard the howl of a hound. They could now hear the low thunder of horse hooves and then, through the tall bracken opposite them, came the two dogs and John Deane's party of riders.

"Deane!" cried Lord Hunstone in relief, "Over here!"

Deane's riders slowed their pace and drew their horses to a panting halt in front of the scene. Dorkins leapt down from his saddle and reined in the hounds who were trying to get to Lady Hannah's corpse. Lowe, Lord Hunstone's butler, immediately went to his master and slipped him a small flask, whilst also gazing with horrified fascination around him.

Deane jumped down from his steed and went to Lord Hunstone, all the time taking in the carnage on the white carpeted furrows.

"My Lord Hunstone, whatever has happened?"

CHAPTER 11.

MORE DECEIT

Before Lord Hunstone could speak, a shout from behind them made everyone turn. It was Sir Richard Dalton, his face scratched, his clothes torn and his manner desperate as he stumbled from the tree-line onto the field. Dalton ran toward them, breathless and staggering and it was old Jessop who moved to help him stay on his feet and catch his breath.

Lord Hunstone spoke first: "Dalton! Pray, what has happened to you and where is Westonby?"

"The Woodwose - " said Dalton and had to stop again to recover his breathing, but at the same time taking the shotgun from Jessop. Jessop looked meaningfully at Lord Hunstone.

"It has done for Westonby at the stag's cave, and was giving chase to me all the way here," gasped Dalton, looking back the way he had come, and cocking the shotgun. "Have your shotguns cocked, my fine fellows!" he shouted and those men who had weapons now hurriedly drew and prepared them while looking all about them.

John Deane, ever the practical level-headed leader, took umbrage at Dalton's authority over the men he himself had been leading for the past half of an hour. Deane approached Dalton, who now gently pushed Jessop away, being able to stand on his own as his breath returned.

"Perhaps you can explain what exactly has befallen these poor wretches who lie still in the snow?" asked Deane.

But before Dalton could make answer, Lord Hunstone addressed Deane as he had not done so before.

"John," began Lord Hunstone, "there is terrible news for you to bear and I only ask that you steel yourself before your hear it."

Deane turned away from Dalton and looked at

Lord Hunstone with curiosity.

"It is Lady Hannah who lies at our feet on this cursed earth," began Lord Hunstone, looking at his deceased child, but he got no further.

"Aye!" shouted Dalton, "shot in cold blood by this wretched stable boy who mistook her for a Woodwose and who then came at me with his knife causing me to end his miserable life."

Deane's eyes shone with this intelligence. "And the gentleman over there — Mr. James Bellamy I believe — how did he meet his end?"

"Why, the boy shot him down before assaulting me!" said Dalton and he pulled open his torn coat to show the dried blood stain, though with clothes so soiled, it was somewhat hard to discern.

"There's more, John." said Lord Hunstone.

Deane looked back at Lord Hunstone, and fear crept into him now.

"There cannot be more," said Deane quietly.

"Dear Martha has also left us," said Lord Hunstone gently, for he knew of the affection his daughters had for Deane and he in turn for them.

"Aye!" cried out Dalton, "devoured by the Woodwose and her remains strewn all about that stag's cave!"

The man servants from Brockton Hall stared at each other in disbelief and Lowe took a large gulp from the flask he had retrieved from his master.

"It is not believable," said Deane quietly.

Dalton strode up to Deane and grabbed him by his collars. "You were not here, Deane. We all saw it with our own eyes."

Deane removed Dalton's hands and turned to Lord Hunstone. "Lord Hunstone, did you witness any of these tragedies for yourself?"

Lord Hunstone turned his face from the ground and looked at Deane.

"No, John," began Lord Hunstone, "but what other possible — "

Lord Hunstone stopped as he followed the others' gaze to see a man arriving on a horse.

"Hugh!" cried Lord Hunstone, "what tidings from you?"

Lord Hugh drew his horse to halt and looked around at the assembled men.

"I reached Brockton as intended but Mr. Deane here had taken all the horses and men and so I was unable to procure a cart," said Lord Hugh. "Where is Westonby?" he asked suddenly.

"The same foul Woodwose that came at me has taken Westonby's life, Hugh." said Dalton.

Lord Hugh stared at Dalton as if to interrogate the truth of the previous statement.

"With the exception of Sir Richard here," said Deane, addressing everyone at once, "Has anyone here seen this phantom Woodwose creature attack any of the victims struck down to-day?"

Lord Hunstone spoke, a deep frown on his features: "We did not, John."

Deane now continued on the path he had set out on. "And who espied young Dick here shoot Lady Hannah?"

There was silence, and Dalton's face grew red with anger.

"I did," said Lord Hugh unexpectedly.

"You?" said Deane. "Pray, tell us exactly what you saw."

Lord Hugh glanced at Dalton but before any words

came, Dalton took the lead.

"Lord Hugh, Bellamy and I heard a shot and came to this field where we saw the boy with the shotgun and Lady Hannah already on the ground," Dalton's voice was trembling with excitement. "The caitiff jumped down from his horse, walked over to our blessed child and shot her once more. When we attempted to apprehend him, he shot John Bellamy and I blasted him before he could do no more. There is the truth of the matter. What say you now, John Deane?"

"I call foul-play, Sir!" said Deane, controlling his emotions. "You are undone, as is your accomplice here."

Lord Hunstone spoke with authority. "How so, John? What claim are you insinuating?"

"I was out angle-fishing with young Dick not a fortnight ago," said Deane, "and he told me he had never once used a fowling piece — let alone a shotgun — in his life. Are we to believe since that time young Dick mastered the weapon and was able to use it to shoot moving targets, his fingers half frozen by frost?"

Lord Hugh looked at Dalton who returned his gaze.

With decisive action, Sir Richard Dalton turned and fired at John Deane, but Jessop's handiwork had not been enough to mend Bellamy's sodden weapon and it exploded in Dalton's hands. Lord Hugh immediately saw what to do and he turned his own shotgun at John Deane but before he could pull the trigger he was thrown backward onto the frozen ground by a shot from Jessop's own fowling piece.

Lowe and Jessop went directly to Lord Hugh, removed his shotgun and inspected his injury which was mortal.

Sir Richard Dalton lay on the ground, his lacerated hands covering his face which was also bloodied.

"I am blinded!" cried Dalton, like a tearful child.

"Who has a rope?" asked Deane, and one of Hunstone's servants climbed down from his horse and brought over a coil to Deane who began to bind fast the struggling Dalton.

Lord Hunstone was beside himself. He ran to Dalton and pushed Deane gently away so that he could place his face close to his old friend. "What did you do, Dalton? When did this plan hatch and how were you able to accomplish it?"

Now blindfolded and tied firmly, Dalton had become as meek as a kitten. "It was the Woodwose," he kept repeating over and over between sobs, "it was the Woodwose."

Lord Hugh raised his voice even as he struggled for breath, "No, Dalton - it was us. Let us own it, for my life ends here in this bloody sod and until it was betrayed this morning I had always persevered to be a man of honour. Tell them the truth, Dalton, that you too might be cleansed before meeting your Maker!"

Lord Hunstone watched Lord Hugh's final exhalation leave him and so he turned once more to look into the bloodied features of Dalton. "I ask you one last time, Richard - you have nothing to gain by twisting the truth. What was your design on my daughters and how in God's name were you able to butcher them in so callous a manner?"

Dalton strained against the rope briefly and then sobbed. "It was the Woodwose took Lady Martha and Westonby. That is God's truth and my final answer to you."

Lord Hunstone stood and looked at John Deane. "Methinks his mind has left him, John."

Jessop now spoke up. "Lord Hunstone, me cottage is but a short distance from 'ere. Allow me to fetch carts and a strong horse."

"Take Lord Hugh's horse, Jessop," said Deane, making a plan, "and you two men go with him to help," he added, looking at the servants. So saying, Jessop climbed onto Lord Hugh's steed and led the way across the field followed by the pair of strong young men whose names were Rose and Parker.

"Lowe, if you please, I wish you to remain here and watch Dalton," instructed Deane. "Dorkins, prepare the hounds. Lord Hunstone, can you lead us back to this stag's cave? We must discover whether Westonby still lives and I should like to determine the circumstance under which Lady Martha met her end."

Lord Hunstone nodded agreement. "I believe I know the way back."

And so, leaving Lowe the butler to watch over the prisoner, John Deane, Lord Hunstone and kennel-master Dorkins rode back to the miserable cave.

CHAPTER 12.

ONCE MORE INTO THE CAVE

John Deane still held doubts as to whether or not a supposed Woodwose had been present at any of the disasters that had occurred that terrible day. He and Dorkins stood looking down the slope that led to the cave entrance. Lord Hunstone, his emotions having gotten the better of him, declined to descend back to the resting place of his elder daughter and he had stayed at the copse with the horses.

Dorkins had left Lord Hunstone one of the dogs as a protection, and brought the other hound on a short leash. Once Deane had seen the body of Westonby in the blood-stained snow he had known that to bring the dog down there would be folly.

"Stay here Dorkins, this is no place for a hound. Hold him tight — unless something comes at me from the cave!" Deane instructed.

Dorkins nodded and tried to control the excited hound while he watched Deane begin to pick his way down the wet slope, now filled with trails from earlier excursions.

Deane felt revulsion as he looked at Westonby's face — his neck at an impossible angle — and looking around recognised in the other scattered jumble remnants of Lady Martha's dress, some of which were yet full with flesh!

He stepped through the wet clutter and smelt a strong, sweet odour that almost made him faint. He raised his shotgun and entered the cave, disappearing into shadow. The dull grey daylight failed to penetrate the blackness and Deane could get no bearings. He peered into the gloom and thought he may have heard something scuttle about but could only see more bones — and worse — at his feet, the elusive recesses of the cave still a dim mystery.

Behind him, Deane heard the hound's constant whining become a ferocious bark and he thought he heard Dorkins say something before the bark became a yelping.

Deane turned back to the daylight and squinted as

the brilliance momentarily blinded him. A shadow fell across the brightness and at his feet crashed the heavy body of the hound, the force driving all life from the mangled animal. Deane was taken aback but ran out of the cave's shadow and looked up the slope.

"Dorkins ! Dorkins !" Deane shouted but returned there no answer.

Deane looked back at the dog. It was stone dead, lying almost on top of the body of Westonby.

Resisting a shiver, Deane ran forward and began to scramble up the slope, the melting snow impeding his progress.

When he got to the top he found only that the snow had been much disturbed. There was no sign of Dorkins. Deane then ran in the direction of the copse.

"Dorkins ! Lord Hunstone !" he called as he ran but no answer came.

Except for a single dead horse lying on its side with its back broken, the copse was abandoned. The many tracks were too confused to follow.

Deane knew the best course of action was to go back to the field where at least Jessop, Rose and Parker would be rejoining Lowe the butler and he could consider their next action. If Dorkins and Lord Hunstone had been obliged to make a hasty escape then surely they too would head back to the field. But something troubled Deane. Who — or what — had thrown the hound down the slope? Surely it could not have been Dorkins. But if not he, then the possibility began to unfold that somebody — something else — had done the deed. Still, Deane resisted the conclusion that a Woodwose could in any way be responsible. "They cannot and do not exist!" thought Deane.

He continued on his way back to the field; wet, cold and with a feeling he was trapped in an endless mystery.

CHAPTER 13.

"NAUGHT BUT DEATH"

Lowe had worked for the Hunstone family for forty years and had grown fond of the two sisters so that his faith in God was sorely tested as he now stood on the desolate field, cold bodies about him, his master in peril and nothing to do but wait. He pulled out the flask again and let the liquid warm his throat. He stamped his boots a little against the cold and could not help but think of sitting in Mrs. Butterworth's warm kitchen, perhaps enjoying a little pipe while the hot smells of baking wafted around him.

The strangled cry of a carrion crow caused the vision to vanish and misery descended around him as he looked from corpse to corpse. He heard Sir Richard Dalton stir and having nobody else to tend to, walked and knelt at his side. Lowe adjusted the blindfold which was now damp with blood.

"I knew you as a boy, Sir Richard," said Lowe. Dalton stopped his moaning and listened.

"You weren't always bad," said Lowe, "and I know you remember your God and yours learning. As the Good Samaritan taught, let me give you something to warm yourself, because make no mistake Sir Richard, you's be 'avin' an appointment at the prison 'ouse at Rugeley an' after that, only God will save you."

Lowe took out the flask and unscrewed the lid. He lifted Dalton's head and put the flask to his lips. Dalton slurped thirstily at the liquid for a few moments.

Lowe placed Dalton's head back onto the horse blanket put there as a cold comfort.

"I thank you, Lowe," said Dalton. "If I should perish on this field, I want you to know the truth of this day's events, for somebody should and there is none else."

"I will 'ear you," said Lowe, "though if confession you be wantin'; I lack the qualifications."

"No confession," said Dalton. "Only God's truth."

And so saying, Sir Richard Dalton told the story from the start, and this time missed nor twisted any part of the tale. He told how he and Lord Hugh had accidentally shot at Lady Hannah; how Bellamy had attempted to cajole them into surrender and also been killed for his efforts; how Dick had shown remarkable courage in attacking he himself with just a penny knife and had also lost his life. And he also told of the Woodwose. Of the attack in the morning, of the terrible smell and how the thing bore a striking similarity to an old tapestry in Shugborough Hall.

"The whole of it is true, Lowe. Mark it." said Dalton finally.

"I will, Sir Richard," said Lowe and he stood up, having heard horses approaching.

"Who is it that comes now?" asked Dalton. "Is Deane and Hunstone returned, or that blasted farmer Jessop who did for me?"

Lowe stood up, still grasping the flask.

"Incredible!" said Lowe in a near whisper. "You was right, Sir Richard, you was right!"

Dalton became agitated and longed to see what Lowe's comment meant, but blindfold and strapped as he was, he could only listen keenly to the noises around.

Across the field came Lord Hunstone and Dorkins on horseback accompanied by a terrified hound that now ran free of any leash. Dorkins was shouting at the top of his voice: "Lowe - for the love of God get you a shotgun ready !"

But Lowe seemed frozen to the spot because he had seen what was pursuing the group. Close behind them something tumbled and gambolled through the snow-filled furrows, something brown and furry and huge. In one hand it carried a branch as large as a small tree, dragging and waving it as though it were the weight of a taper.

"The 'wose," said Lowe under his breath, "your 'wose is come, Sir Richard!"

And then all Sir Richard Dalton could hear - for what seemed like an eternity - was the sound of men shouting, a dog yelping and horses whinnying as they galloped around.

"Free me!" shouted Dalton, struggling against his bonds. "Heaven help me!"

But no assistance came, only more awful noise and the men's shouts turned to screams and Dalton heard one horse gallop away and another horse fell so close to him that he felt the hot breath of the animal and heard it struggling to get back up on its legs. He heard a single strangled cry from Lord Hunstone: "Dorkins!" cut short by a huge crash and then the panting of someone near to collapse and the heavy footfalls of something crunching through the frozen snow, accompanied by a low growl he was only too familiar with.

At the same time a sweet smell filled his nostrils, a over-powering scent that seemed to find its way into his brain. And then - silence !

Dalton lay still in the snow, listening for anything, but even the crows seemed to have flown. The last of the dead leaves fell from branches and so quiet was it that Dalton fancied he heard them touch the snow after their short flight.

At last, he heard distant footsteps crunching over the furrows but these were slow, methodical steps. He heard a voice curse and then the footsteps grew louder until something stood over him.

“Even after all hell has broken loose, still you live on Richard Dalton,” said a voice that Dalton had grown to despise. He found his head was being lifted, his blindfold removed and his painful eyes dabbed with a rag. Dalton strained to open his eyes, but the pain kept them almost shut. However, he caught a glimpse of John Deane’s features looking at him with curiosity.

“I confess I am now mystified,” said Deane. “How do you now account for the utter transformation of this dismal place into a veritable field of combat ?”

Dalton took a breath: “Deane, I only heard things - terrible things. My poor eyes are still too sorely to open properly, pray tell me what you can see.”

A whistle of wind blew across the two men causing the fallen leaves to dance for a moment.

“Death.” said Deane. “There is naught but death here.”

How could Deane describe the scene about him? Lord Hunstone, Lowe and Dorkins - all now lay in attitudes of agony, their bodies brutally ripped, joining young Dick, Bellamy and sweet Lady Hannah in a white and crimson death-bed ! The tableau was also ornamented with two horses and a dog - all torn asunder, their entrails steaming into the frozen air. But most disturbing to Deane were the abundant giant prints made by something of a size that dwarfed the foot-prints of the men.

“Unless you truly be the greatest hocus pocus since Fawks, then it is undeniable, Dalton.” whispered Deane, “your Woodwose is corporal and it now falls to me, as a dutiful Christian, to get you from this place before this beast returns.”

So saying, John Deane lifted Dalton to his feet and, keeping the prisoner’s hands bound, hauled him over his shoulder, as a rustic might a sack of flour. In this wise, Deane carried the weakened Dalton across the furrows but was forced to stop when he reached the edge of the field in order to negotiate the hedgerow. As he put Dalton back on his feet to cross the boundary, he heard a bustle heading toward them. What sweet relief it was to Deane when he saw old Jessop, Rose and Parkin pulling two carts with their horses across the frozen sod.

“Your carriage arrives,” mocked Deane.

“What will become of me?” asked Dalton, beseechingly.

“We have a long way ahead of us back to Brockton Hall,” said Deane. “Pray save your questions until I am gone from your presence and you are alone in your cell. Only then may you make enquiry of God himself, for it is He alone you will answer to.”

EPILOGUE

Over the coming months, Sir Richard Dalton wrote many letters from the Prison House at Rugeley and never once departed from the story as told above. Following his trial at Stafford Assizes, Dalton was found guilty of causing the deaths of eight persons and hanged at Sandyford Bridge.

Old Storm, Dalton’s horse, was said to have found its own way back to Shugborough Hall but refused anyone who tried to mount him. He could never again be enticed to approach any tree and was finally put out to graze in the warm meadows around Shugborough where he ended his days.

Lady Hunstone died a year after the above events, it was said of a broken heart. Brockton Hall was bequeathed to John Deane but the house had too much sentiment for him to bear and it was sold shortly afterward and re-named. Deane never married, writing in a letter to his mother that he could never love again after losing the only two women he considered suitable. He later joined the British Army, became an Officer and was killed in the Province of New-York during the war with America.

Nothing more was heard of The Woodwose of Cannock Chase for some years, until a hermit named Dick Slee warned children that a Woodwose lived nearby, though none saw it for themselves.

Perchance The Woodwose of Cannock Chase lingers there still, awaiting an opportune moment to strike down more innocent persons.


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